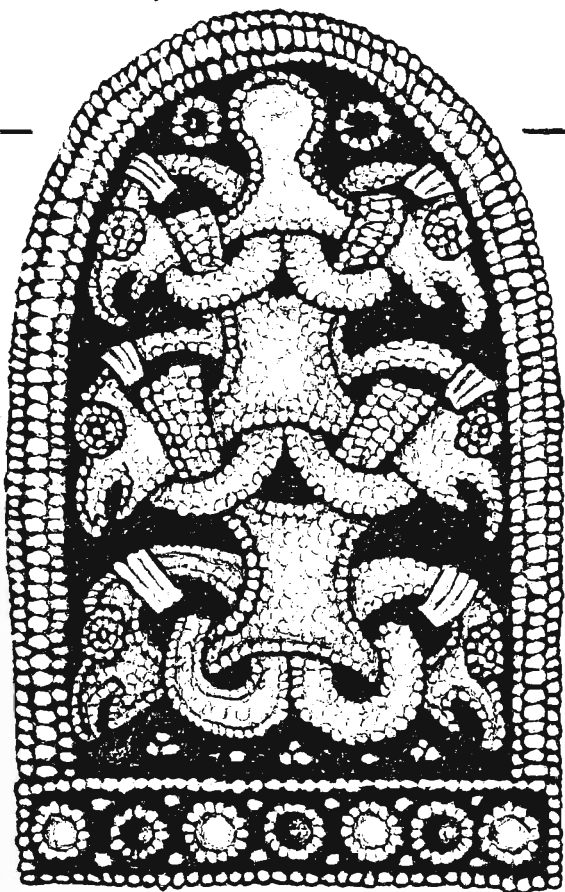
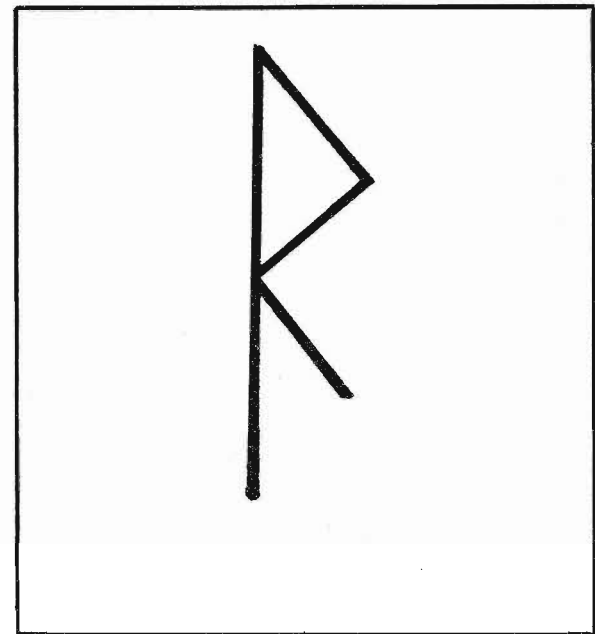


WHAT IS ASATRU?



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PREFACE

This booklet was written to provide answers to the questions likely to be asked by anyone just starting to investigate Asatru. Thus, you'll find few lengthy theological essays, but many clearly-worded replies to the sort of queries most asked by the average person.

The opinions given here are often not hard-and-fast doctrine. Many Asatru-believers will not accept each and every word written here. Still, the outlines are valid and represent a vast amount of study and thought. It is hoped and confidently expected that this work will prove useful to the newcomer and the more experienced individual alike.

Stephen A. McNallen
Breckenridge, Texas, 1985



What is Asatru?

Long before Christianity came to Northern Europe, the people there had their own religions. One of these was Asatru. It was practiced in the lands that are today Scandinavia, England, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and other countries as well. Asatru is the original or native religious belief for the peoples who lived in these regions.

What does the word "Asatru" mean?

It means "belief in the Gods" in Old Norse, the language of ancient Scandinavia in which so much of our source material was written.

When did Asatru start?

Asatru is thousands of years old. Its beginnings are lost in prehistory, but as an organized system, it is older than Christianity. Strictly speaking, since Asatru is the religion which springs from the specific spiritual beliefs of the Northern Europeans, it is as old as this branch of the human race which came into being some 40,000 years ago.

Why do we need Asatru? Aren't most people who want religion satisfied with Christianity or the other "established" religions?

People are attracted to the better-known religions because they have genuine spiritual needs which must be filled. Asatru has not been an alternative for them until recently. Once they realize that there is another way - a better, more natural way - they will not be satisfied with anything less than a return to the religion of their ancestors.

Why is the religion of our ancient ancestors the best one for us?

Because we are more like our ancestors than we are like anyone else. We inherited not only their general physical appearance, but also their predominant mental, emotional and spiritual traits. We think and feel more as they did; our basic religious needs are most like theirs. The faith which best expressed their innermost nature - Asatru - is better suited to us than is some other creed which started on the other side of the world among people who are not our ancestors.

Why did Asatru die out if it was the right religion for Northern Europeans?

Asatru was subjected to a violent campaign of repression over a period of hundreds of years. The people did not give up their cherished beliefs easily.

Despite this persecution, elements of Asatru continued down to our own times - often in the guise of folklore - proving that our native religion appeals to our innermost beings in a fundamental way.

Wasn't the acceptance of Christianity a sign of civilization - a step forward from barbarism?

Not at all. The so-called "barbarians" who followed Asatru (the Vikings, the various Germanic tribes, and so forth) were the source of our finest civilized traditions - trial by jury, parliaments, Anglo Saxon common law, and the rights of women to name a few. The very word "law" comes from the Norse language, not from the tongues of the Christian lands. We simply did not and do not need Christianity to be civilized.

You say Asatru was the religion of the Vikings, among other early European cultures. Weren't they a pretty bloodthirsty lot?

The Vikings were no more violent than the other people of their times. Remember, descriptions of Viking raids and invasions were always written by their enemies, who certainly were not unbiased. Historians now agree that the stereotype of the cruel, barbaric Norsemen is a false image, although truly they were brave warriors worthy of our admiration.

What are the basic tenets or beliefs of Asatru?

We believe in an underlying, all-pervading divine energy or essence which is generally hidden from us because it surpasses our direct understanding. We further believe that this spiritual reality is interdependent with us - that we affect it, and it affects us.

We believe that this underlying divinity expresses itself to us in the forms of the Gods and Goddesses. Stories about these deities are like a sort of code, the mysterious "language" through which the divine reality speaks to us.

We believe in standards of behavior which are consistent with these spiritual truths and harmonious with our deepest being.

How does Asatru differ from other religions?

Asatru is unlike the better-known religions in many ways. Some of these are:

We are polytheistic - that is, we believe in a number of deities, including Goddesses as well as Gods. (We have a tongue-in-cheek saying that a religion without a Goddess is halfway to atheism!)

We do not accept the idea of "original sin", the notion that we are tainted from birth and intrinsically bad, as does Christianity. Thus, we do not need "saving".

We do not claim to be a universal religion, a faith for all of humankind. In fact, we don't think such a thing is possible. The various branches of humanity have different ways of looking at the world, and thus naturally should have different religions.

Do you consider the Norse myths to be true?

The Norse myths are stories about the Gods and Goddesses of Asatru. We believe they are ways of stating religious truths. That is, we would say they contain truths about the nature of divinity, our nature, and the relationship between the two. We do not contend that the myths are literally true, as history.

What about these Gods and Goddesses? Are they real?

Yes, they are real. However, just as most Christians do not think their God is really an old bearded figure sitting on a golden chair in heaven, we do not believe Thor (for example) is actually a muscular, man-shaped entity carrying a big hammer. There is a real Thor, but we approach an understanding of him through a particular mental picture.

Do followers of Asatru pray to their Gods and Goddesses?

Yes, but not quite the way most people mean by the word. We never surrender our will to theirs or humble ourselves before them, because we see ourselves as their kin, not as their property. Nor do we beg and plead. We do, however, commune with them and honor

them while seeking their blessing, through formal rites and through informal meditation. Actually, living a full and virtuous life is a form of prayer itself. Our religion should affect all parts of our lives, not just some fragments that we choose to call "religious".

Don't you worship stones and trees and statues?

No. We know that trees, wooden statues, the Sun, and other natural or man-made objects are not Gods, so we don't worship them. We do sometimes use these items as reminders of a God or Goddess, and we believe they can become "charged" with a certain aspect of the divine energy, but we would never confuse them with the actual deity!

You mentioned certain standards of behavior taught in Asatru. What are these?

Some of the qualities we hold in high regard are strength, courage, joy, honor, freedom, loyalty to kin, realism, vigor, and the honoring of our ancestors. To express these things in our lives is virtuous, and we strive to do this. Their opposites - weakness, cowardice, adherence to dogma rather than to the realities of the world, and the like - constitute our vices and are to be avoided. Proper behavior in Asatru consists of maximising one's virtues and minimizing one's vices.

This code of conduct reflects the highest and most heroic ideals of our people.

Don't all religions believe these things you've just named?

Not really. People may honestly believe that this is the case, but examination does not bear this out. They believe in freedom, yet their scriptures

say they are slaves to their God. They accept that joy is good, but their teachings laden them with guilt because of "original sin". They want to accept the real world on a pragmatic basis, yet are told to suspend critical thought and believe dogma when the teachings of their church conflict with reason or with known facts about the nature of the world ("You must have faith.").

Sure, many of us believe in the values of Asatru on a gut level. After all, they're instinctive, passed down to us from our Northern European ancestors. We want to believe that the better-known religions espouse those values, so we see what we want to see. Most people just haven't realized yet that the ordinary religions are saying things that conflict with the values we know in our hearts are right. To find Northern European virtues, you have to look to the ancestral Northern belief - Asatru.

What do you have to say about good and evil?

What we call good and evil will vary. What is good in one case will not be good in another, and evil in one circumstance will not be evil under a different set of conditions. In any one instance, the right course of action will have been shaped by the influences of the past and the present - the result may or may not be "good" or "evil", but it will still be the right action.

What does Asatru teach about an afterlife?

We believe that there is an afterlife, and that those who have lived virtuous lives will go on to experience greater fulfillment, pleasure, and challenge. Those who have led lives characterized more by vice than by virtue will be separated from kin, doomed to

an existence of dullness and gloom. The precise nature of the afterlife - what it will look like, what it will feel like - surpasses our understanding and is dealt with symbolically in the myths.

A portion of ourselves consisting of certain spiritual qualities and powers is released with the death of the body, and can be reborn from generation to generation in the family line. Thus, we live on through our descendants quite apart from an afterlife in the usual sense.

A note: we of Asatru do not overly concern ourselves with our abode in the next life. We must live here and now in this life. The next world will take care of itself.

Does Asatru involve ancestor worship?

Asatru says we should honor our ancestors. It also says we are bonded to those ancestors (and to our descendants) in a special way. However, we do not actually worship them.

We believe our forebears have passed to us certain spiritual qualities just as surely as they have given us various physical traits. They live on in us. The family or clan is above and beyond the limitations of time and place. Thus we have a reverence for our ancestry even though we do not involve ourselves in ancestor worship as such.

Does Asatru have a holy book, like the Bible?

No. There are written sources which are useful to us because they contain much of our sacred lore in the form of myths and examples of conduct, but we do not accept them as infallible or inspired docu-

ments. The real source of holy wisdom is inside us, passed down to us from our ancestors as instinct, emotion, and innate predispositions. By combining this insight with the literature available to us, we arrive at religious truth. This living spiritual guidance is better than any dusty, dogmatic "holy book".

I've heard Asatru described as a "Nature religion". What does that mean?

We treasure the spiritual awe, the feeling of "connecting" with the Gods and Goddesses, which can come from experiencing the beauty and majesty of Nature. Our deities work in and through natural law, and by working in harmony with Nature we can become co-workers with the Gods. This attitude removes the opposition between "natural" and "supernatural", and the supposed conflict between religion and science. Philosophically and practically, "Nature religions" have real advantages!

What, according to Asatru, is the origin of the universe?

Our myths describe the beginning of the universe as the unfolding of a natural process, rather than one requiring supernatural intervention. Modern followers of Asatru need not abandon present-day science to retain their religion. The old lore of our people describes the interaction of fire and ice and the development of life from these - but these are symbolic, and we will leave it to the physicists to discover how the universe was born.

What are the runes, and what do they have to do with Asatru?

Runes are ancient Germanic symbols representing various concepts or forces in the universe. Taken together, they can be used as a philosophical system expressing the worldview of our ancestors and as tools for revealing religious truths. Their meanings are intimately connected with the teachings of Asatru, and in our mythology we have the story of how Odin, father of the Gods, won them through painful ordeal so that Gods and humans alike might benefit from their wisdom.

How is Asatru organized?

Asatru is non-authoritarian, and ours is a decentralized religion which expresses our love of freedom. While we do have definite tenets, we have less dogma than many systems of belief. There is no all-powerful spiritual leader whose word is law; no "pope" of Asatru to dictate truth. Indeed, we believe each person can learn to listen to the voice of divine wisdom within them. No guru or priest has the one-and-only direct line to the Gods. The Gods live in you!

How can I learn more about Asatru?

This primer is published by the Asatru Free Assembly, P.O. Box 1754, Breckenridge, Texas 76024. We publish a great deal of information relating to Asatru as practiced in our organization, and we would be glad to help you learn more.

